



IPSP Module Series

Working as a Team Module

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Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Why Mentoring?



In this module we will be looking at the role mentoring plays in the field of paraeducating. We all have ideas about who can be a mentor, but as paraeducators we need to be thinking more about how mentoring works for us. We will be exploring what a mentor is and how we as paraeducators can become mentors for others.

The Indiana Paraeducator Support Project (IPSP) has developed this module to give a little background and some practical advice and tools on mentoring. While we designed the pages to be done in order, there is no need to do them that way. You may decide to choose pages that seem of interest to you at first, and move to others as you see the need. Please feel free to contact our office if you have questions, or are in need of some support.

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What you will know and be able to do at the end of this module

1. The definition of mentor.
2. Why mentors are important people.
3. Who can be a mentor.
4. What it means to be a good mentor.
5. Reflect upon your own experiences of being a new paraeducator.
6. How mentoring is a life-long job.

CEC Paraeducator Performance Standards

This module has been designed to support paraeducators in meeting the following Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) performance standards for paraeducators:

- Standard 9: Professional and Ethical Practice – Skill # 3**
 - Act as a role model for individuals with exceptional learning needs.
- Standard 9: Professional and Ethical Practice - Skill #7**
 - Maintain a high level of competence and integrity.
- Standard 9: Professional and Ethical Practice - Skill #10**
 - Engage in activities to increase one's own knowledge and skills.
- Standard 10: Collaboration - Skill #2**
 - Collaborate with stakeholders as directed.
- Standard 10: Collaboration - Skill #3**
 - Foster respectful and beneficial relationships.
- Standard 10: Collaboration - Skill #5**
 - Function in a manner that demonstrates a positive regard for the distinctions between roles and responsibilities of paraeducators and those of professionals.

Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Let's Begin:

Introduction

The roles and responsibilities of paraeducators are complex and demanding. In a recent survey in Indiana, paraeducators reported that their jobs are “hard work with many small rewards,” but also indicated that upon starting in the position of paraeducator, it would have been helpful to have a mentor to go to for help and advice.

When we consider that the paraeducator is expected to work with children with and without disabilities, who have limited English proficiency, who come from disadvantaged homes, who are diverse in culture and ethnicity, and who are of various ages and grade levels (Pickett, Faison, & Formanek, 1999), it is no wonder that paraeducators have questions and concerns about their roles and responsibilities.

While often times the teacher of record is the best source of information regarding students' abilities and needs, it is the other paraeducators in the school that can provide an “insider's view” of how the school works, including words of wisdom for teaming with particular teachers, hints on helping particular students, and useful tips for figuring out tricky equipment, working the copy machine, or simply finding the bathroom!

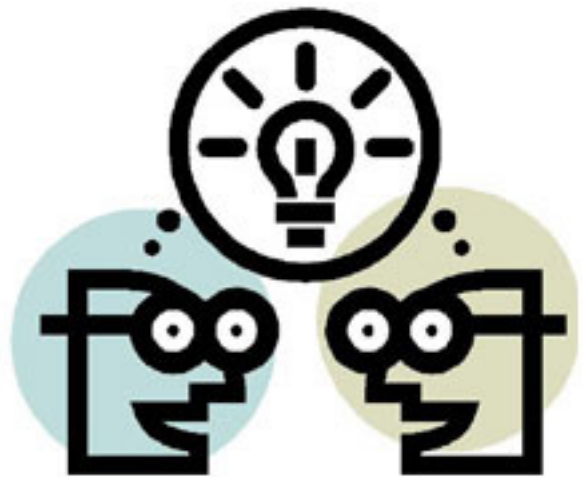
This module is designed to teach experienced paraeducators to take on the role of mentor for paraeducators who are just starting out in the field, those who are new to the school, or those who need some extra support. Paraeducators can be valuable resources in helping new paraeducators to organize and understand the complexities of the position. In addition, it is not hard to imagine that someone who starts any new job would really appreciate having an experienced friend there to give encouragement and to lend an ear.

Brainstorming Exercise

Our first step is to do a little brainstorming exercise. Remember that a brainstorming exercise is a list of all the things you can think of about a particular idea. And everything you think of is okay to put on your list. Later on, you can decide if you want to take it off your list. The first thing you need is a pen and paper to write your list.

Once you are ready, you should brainstorm and make a list of all the words you would use to describe a MENTOR. Time yourself for 3 minutes. How many words can you think of to describe mentors and mentoring?

When you are done with your list, you should congratulate yourself on a good brainstorming session and go to the next section entitled, “What Is a Mentor?”



Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

What is a Mentor?



There are many definitions of what a mentor is. Here are three:

1. Webster's Universal College Dictionary defines a mentor as "a **wise** and **trusted counselor** or **teacher**."
2. John Reh, an expert on mentoring in the business world defines a mentor as "an individual, usually **older** and **more experienced**, who helps and guides another individual's development. This guidance is **not done for personal gain**." (<http://management.about.com>)
3. In education research, McBrien & Brandt (1997) say that a mentor is "a **role model offering support** to another person." They also say that a mentor "**has knowledge** and **experience** in an area and **shares** it with the person being mentored."

(McBrien, J. L., & Brandt, R. S. (1997). The language of learning: A guide to education terms. Alexandria, VA: ASCD).

Compare your brainstorming list to the words you see in bold in the above definitions and answer the following questions:

1. When you look at the list you brainstormed to describe mentors, and you look at some of the words that Webster's, Reh, and McBrien & Brandt use to describe mentors, do you see any words that you have in common?
2. Did you come up with any words that they didn't?
3. Do you agree with their definitions?
4. What are some words that you do not agree with?
5. Are there any words that you would like to take off your brainstorming list?

When you are done thinking about these questions, go to the next section entitled, "Why Is Mentoring Important?"

Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Why is Mentoring Important?

When most people think about mentors, they think about positive characteristics of other people who have helped them. When you were making your list, you probably thought about how someone could be supportive and show you how to deal with certain aspects of your job that they know more about. This person may encourage you, give you good feedback, and lend an ear when you have a question. This may give you some obvious reasons why mentoring is important: it makes people feel good in their jobs. But it goes further than that. Mentoring is important for many reasons.

- Mentoring helps people quickly “learn the ropes” of a new job.
- Mentoring helps people meet their new colleagues and build a social network.
- Mentoring helps people do their job correctly.
- Mentoring helps people build confidence, because they get feedback about if they are doing their jobs correctly.
- Mentoring helps people get supplies and information more efficiently.
- Mentoring helps people feel competent by having someone who gives them credit for their work.
- Mentoring helps people feel satisfied in their workplace by providing a venting place for frustrations.
- Mentoring helps people stay in their jobs, by helping to make the workplace a nice place to work.
- Mentoring helps people feel like they are in a professional setting, working with people who are serious about their jobs.

CAUTION!! This is not a complete list!!

Pick up your pen and paper again. It is your job to look at your brainstormed list and make a sentence to add to our list about how mentoring helps people. Think of how a mentor helps you. What does it look like?

Finish this sentence:
 MENTORING HELPS PEOPLE...

Now that we know why mentoring is important, let's take a look at these people who are doing this important mentoring job.

Go to the next section entitled “Who Is a Mentor?”





IPSP Module Series

Working as a Team Module

Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Who is a Mentor?

Pick up your pen and paper, because it is time for another brainstorming session! Time yourself for three minutes, and make a list of everyone you can think of who could be a mentor.

How many people did you come up with in those three minutes? Paraeducators tend to be good at this brainstorming activity, because they see so many opportunities where good mentors are useful and make their jobs easier.

Who did you include in your list? Did you include teachers? Administrators? Students? Other paraeducators? Did you include yourself? We hope so, because if you are a veteran paraeducator, or if you are a paraeducator just starting out, you are mentor material!



If you did not include yourself in your list, add that now. If you did include yourself as a person who could be a mentor, put a star next to it, because you are the most important mentor of all!

At the beginning of this module, we saw the characteristics of mentors. In the previous section, we talked about why mentoring is important. In this section we saw that you, as a paraeducator, are also a mentor. So, this means that it is important that you, as a paraeducator, have the characteristics that you put on your first brainstorming list! When you think of yourself, do those characteristics come to mind? Maybe some do, and maybe some don't, but there are ways of making sure that you can develop into a good mentor.

For those paraeducators who have been in the field for a long time, you have the benefit of lots of experience. For those paraeducators who are newer to the field, you have the benefit of growing as a mentor along with growing in experience. All paraeducators have the opportunity to gain some experience in professionalism.

Go to the next section entitled, "Good Mentors," to take a look at some of the characteristics of good mentors.

Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Good Mentors

There has been quite a bit of research on what makes a good mentor. In this section, we list those characteristics that researchers have found. (Rowley, J. B. (1999). The good mentor. *Educational Leadership*, 56(8), 20-22.)

For each characteristic, think of yourself as a paraeducator. How do you rate on each one?

With that pen and paper, rate yourself from one to five, *1. I think I need a lot of work in this area* and *5. I think I do pretty well in this area*. For each rating you give yourself, make sure you can think of an example that shows why you rated yourself this way.

1. The good mentor is committed to the role of mentoring. In other words, no one else forces the mentor to be a mentor—she wants to be, and she likes to think of herself in the role of mentoring. She may seek out opportunities to help the newer paraeducators of other staff or faculty. She understands that mentoring can be difficult, but that it is worth the time and effort. She encourages others to view her as a professional in her field, and as a result, she becomes known as a leader. It is not necessary for a mentor to have the title of mentor. Some times it is something that just everyone knows about her. The important aspect is that she is dedicated to helping paraeducators be the best they can be in order to help the students with whom they work.

2. The good mentor is accepting of the beginning paraeducators. Mentors help others with less knowledge or experience without judging them. They are empathic and understand and remember what it was like to not understand the job well. They are patient and let the newcomers understand that they will get better with practice.

3. The good mentor is skilled at providing instructional support. No two children are alike, and no two groups of children are alike. However, good mentors will try to understand the characteristics of the students to whom the inexperienced paraeducator has been assigned, and will try to help the inexperienced paraeducator implement effective teaching strategies. Often paraeducators who are new to the field do not have a lot of teaching experience, especially in instructional methods. Teachers of record are excellent resources to learn more about these methods, but veteran paraeducators also have good ideas and much experience, and may be very valuable sources of teaching ideas for all kinds of learners. In addition, veteran paraeducators can direct new paraeducators to particular teachers who have reputations as good explainers of teaching strategies.



4. The good mentor is effective in different interpersonal contexts. Paraeducators must be able to respectfully work with other paraeducators, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and students. The best mentors are good at these relationships. Good mentors are professional, they obey codes of ethics, they respect confidentiality, they try to contribute to the professionalization of the field of paraeducating, and they conduct themselves with a positive disposition, honest demeanor, and easy-going personality. They themselves take constructive criticism and offer constructive criticism in a professional manner. They demonstrate qualities of good citizens by being trustworthy, by not gossiping, and by continually keeping in mind their goals of doing everything necessary to help children. All personnel involved at a school admire these kinds of people.

5. The good mentor is a model of a continuous learner. The field of education is always changing. We are always learning more and more about the way students learn and develop. To keep on top of this research, good mentors attend training sessions that are available to them. They seek additional knowledge by asking questions, reading books, doing internet searches, completing modules like this one, and showing interest in new ideas, especially those that are different from the ideas they previously used.

Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Good Mentors continued

Novice paraeducators who see experienced paraeducators always trying to learn new things can realize that the job of paraeducating involves a lot of self-initiative and love of learning to help children by using the newest techniques. Just as all teachers spend time at trainings and their own time at home reading and searching for information, paraeducators who see this as part of their job may find they are more able to understand their students' needs.

6. The good mentor communicates hope and optimism. No jobs in education are easy ones. They may be fun, exciting, fulfilling, and interesting, but they are not easy. Good mentors are good at supporting beginning paraeducators through the rough beginning time, through the bad days, and through the down times. Good mentors also remind newer paraeducators to appreciate the good days and good times. The classroom and school personnel are always changing. Sometimes these changes are for the best, and sometimes they seem unmanageable. Experienced paraeducators who are good mentors lend their ears, a couple extra minutes in the morning, half of their candy bar, a pat on the shoulder, and some encouragement to cast a positive outlook on the dark shadows. Even while the mentor may admit that the situation is not very promising at the time, he or she will also understand and convey that the situation has the potential to change.



So how did you do? Do you think you already have the characteristics of a good mentor, or do you have some work to do? Either way, there is good news! **You have a lot of potential!** Think back to the reasons mentoring is important, especially the one you thought of yourself. These are all important reasons, and they should help you see why you benefit from trying to become a mentor by practicing the six characteristics listed above. Congratulations! Just by completing this module, you are practicing being a continuous learner, and you are well on your way to developing your mentoring skills.

In the next section, we are going to look at some questions that you can ask yourself to foster the habit of thinking about yourself as a mentor and professional. This section is entitled, "Reflection and Empathy in Mentoring."

Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring

The second characteristic that we saw in the list of good mentors was about accepting beginning paraeducators. Much of this good mentoring skill involves empathy. The key to having empathy is to think about what it is like to be in someone else's place. The following questions can help paraeducators think back on what it was like to be a beginning paraeducator.

Now get your pen and paper again and jot down some answers to each of the questions.

1. What did I have trouble learning when I first started?
2. What would I want another paraeducator to explain to me?
3. What is the easiest part of this job?
4. What is the most confusing part about this job?
5. What is the best part of this job?
6. Which teachers are the most helpful?
7. What makes these particular teachers helpful?

After answering these questions, think about how you responded to some of the paraeducators who have started their jobs after you. Did you help them the way that you would have liked to be helped? Is it easier now to see how difficult it is to enter the field of paraeducating? Do you have any ideas now about how you could do a better job of helping any new paraeducators or paraeducators who are working in a new situation that you have already been in?

Besides reflecting about how it was as a beginning paraeducator, there may be other things that you can think of to do to show appreciation for paraeducators at your school. Good mentors create an environment of support, respect, and teamwork.

Pick up that pen and paper one last time. Time yourself for another three minutes. In that three minutes use those brainstorming skills that you have honed during this module and make a list of all the ways that you as an individual paraeducator could start developing further your mentoring abilities by helping other paraeducators, teachers, and administrators value the work of paraeducators. In other words, what are some of the things that we as mentors can do to make sure that other paraeducators, teachers, and administrators are valuing paraeducators?

Now that you have brainstormed, how many ideas did you come up with? How many are feasible? Which ones can you start doing tomorrow? Great! Get to it!

In the next section, entitled, "Mentoring Never Ends," we will conclude this module and sum up the importance of mentoring as a paraeducator.



Why Mentoring?
Let's Begin: Intro
What is a Mentor?
Why is Mentoring Important?
Who is a Mentor?
Good Mentors
Reflection & Empathy in Mentoring
Mentoring Never Ends

Mentoring Never Ends

Unlike this module, mentoring never ends. It is a life-long endeavor. While this module was primarily focused on mentoring as a paraeducator, you will find yourself in mentoring situations throughout your life, inside and outside of the classroom or school. Whether you mentor your own child, your students, another paraeducator, a parent, a teacher, a neighbor, or a friend, the importance of mentoring never goes away, and the characteristics of good mentors can be applied to all these situations.

Hopefully, some of the information in this module has inspired you to take a closer look at the practices you currently use and compare them to the practices that good mentors currently use. You undoubtedly can see at least a little bit of yourself in these good mentor practices. This shows that you have the potential to make a good mentor for the field of education as a paraeducator. And that is a worthy cause!



Here are some closing thoughts and experiences from fellow paraeducators that exemplify mentoring!

Linda Crum, Robinson Elementary School in Anderson:

“ . . . I have had the privilege of working with some wonderful teachers. I have learned from Anderson's best. [B]oth the administration and staff have supported and encouraged me. [They] valued me as an important part of Robinson's learning community. They treated me with dignity and respect. In the classroom, the teachers that I have been paired with have allowed me to work with them, rather than for them.”

Connie Jones, Indianapolis Public Schools:

“When I first started in the classroom for children who have severe disabilities, I didn't know much about my role; but the teachers and the physical therapist explained everything. They taught me how to talk with my one-on-one student, how to take him in and out of his wheelchair, and how to interact with him. The teachers and physical therapist have been great! They give me lots of advice on how to help my student...and any other student!

Phyllis Crabtree, Mary Feeser Elementary in Elkhart:

“ . . . My teacher Jenny will treat me like a team player. I am treated with respect and trust. Jenny feels comfortable knowing that I will do my job. If I need to make a decision before I can check with my teacher she will back me up 100%.”